

Many of the unprecedented number of Christians fleeing violence across the Middle East have taken refuge in Jordan, where fellow Christians are struggling to help them / By ABIGAIL FRYMANN ROUCH

A 'destroyed and forgotten' people

SABIHA LAST saw her husband two years ago. He left to fill the car with petrol and did not return. Islamic State (IS) jihadists were approaching the northern Iraqi town of Bashiqa, to which Sabiha and her family had fled when the group seized control of the nearby city of Mosul two months earlier. Now she and her children would flee again, north to Erbil in Kurdistan. Neighbours who arrived from Bashiqa after her said they saw "many bodies" as they escaped. She feared her husband was among them, but she could not go back in case IS killed her too.

Today Sabiha is in legal and emotional limbo. She and her three children live in safety

in the Jordanian capital, Amman, but she is dependent on food parcels and a local benefactor who pays their rent.

We sit on mattresses on the floor of a barely furnished flat. Without a body, she cannot obtain a death certificate or organise a funeral. Widow status might help her application for resettlement to Australia, but the only "evidence" she has of her husband's death – apart from his absence – is her utter desolation. The alternative is to become a single parent, by asking her Church, the Assyrian Church of the East (ACE), for a divorce. Meanwhile, she suffers from high blood pressure, she is tearful, her 15-year-old son is withdrawn and her 10-year-old son is increasingly violent.

A 2015 census found Jordan to be home to around 130,000 Iraqis, including many who arrived after the lightning strike in 2014 in which Mosul and its surrounding villages, Tikrit and areas of Kirkuk and Salaheddin provinces fell under the jihadists' black flag. Because of its location – and its relative stability – Jordan is also hosting more than 1.3 million refugees of the Syrian civil war.

Despite the two crises being linked, the big institutions and international charities are focusing almost exclusively on refugees from Syria rather than on Iraq. But behind closed doors exiled Iraqis are despairing for their futures, having already lost homes, land and businesses. Some refugees, such as the Syrians, live in camps; others, like the Iraqis, live in private accommodation. Almost all live below the Jordanian poverty line. Clearly, both communities need support.

Some of those fleeing have serious physical injuries from attacks by militias and require ongoing medical treatment. Being a refugee brings its own strains as months of uncertainty drag on, and men, in particular, struggle to shift from a role of breadwinner to charity recipient. Mental health needs among the refugees are "quite huge", says Justin Hett, a psychotherapist trainer at the Centre for Victims of Torture in Amman. "You've got people who are afraid to leave their homes or trust their neighbours, people who are feeling suicidal, relationships breaking down, cycles of domestic violence, people who are struggling to engage with day-to-day living."

A disproportionate number of the Iraqi refugees in Jordan are Christian, though sta-




DISPLACED: Karanfouq, her husband Hikmat and grandsons Jan and Miron fled their home outside Mosul three hours before IS jihadists arrived

tistics are elusive because UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, does not record people's religion. According to Fr Emmanuel Banna, a Syriac Orthodox priest based in Amman, 3,000 Iraqi Christian families fled to Jordan after 2014: Syriac Catholic, Chaldean Catholic, Syriac Orthodox and the Assyrian Church. (Half of Sabiha's church community – 100 families, including the priest – are now in Amman.)

Others have gone to Kurdistan (where there are 1.2m displaced Iraqis), Turkey or Lebanon, or have been resettled in Australia or the US. A Muslim couple from Baghdad, whom Fr Emmanuel is helping, described how the husband's car was shot at as he drove home because the militias disapproved of him, a Sunni, being married to a Shia woman.

THE JORDANIAN Government allows Iraqis and Syrians to stay as "guests", but offers no welfare and bars them from most jobs, although Amman has recently let Syrians apply for work permits. Aid for both communities is woefully underfunded: in May UNHCR said it had received only US\$81.6m (£63.35m) out of a sought US\$320m; of this, US\$78.6m was for Syrians and US\$3m for Iraqis. Refugee children cannot access Jordan's state schools, and Unicef's educational programmes are only for Syrians.

Many Christian refugees have little positive to say about the Muslim neighbours back home who they feel betrayed them or failed to protect them. Some also accuse the Kurdish Peshmerga of abandoning their villages to IS, and a number say the Iraqi Government's failure to protect them means they no longer



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Two Council fathers feature prominently: Abbot, later Bishop Christopher Butler OSB; and Franz, Cardinal König, Archbishop emeritus of Vienna. Both had great regard for *The Tablet*. In 1968 Butler called it "that great journal". In 2005 König dedicated his final book to *The Tablet*.



feel Iraqi. After all, one refugee explains, Christians dutifully respected those in authority – an edict regularly preached in churches that, like Iraq's mosques, were closely monitored during Saddam's dictatorship.

Asked where they believe the roots of the current hatred of Christians lie, refugees I spoke to highlighted various points over the past six decades as Sunni Islam and later Shiism in Iraq became more intolerant. Some point back to the Assyrian genocide perpetrated by Ottoman forces at the same time as the Armenian genocide.

DESPITE THESE difficulties, a number of priests and mostly small religious charities are putting together a safety net for displaced Christians. Fr Emmanuel cites an Iraqi Christian businessman in exile who has donated funds for rent, furniture and clothing. A benefactor in Turkey has paid for blankets and beds. Caritas Jordan is funding medicines, operations and some accommodation, the children's charity SOS gave cash at Easter. World Vision has helped with clothing and grants. The Foundation for Relief and Reconciliation in the Middle East (FRRME), set up by the Anglican Canon Andrew White, funds food parcels, rents, schooling and medical care (although White himself is currently suspended while the Charity Commission investigates allegations of payments to buy back girls forced into sex slavery by IS).

A number of Jordan's Catholic church compounds sheltered refugee families for months but the Patriarchal Bishop for Jordan, Maroun Lahham, points out that this disrupts parish

activities. The Italian bishops have sent €1.7m (£1.5m) to pay for 1,400 private school places. One of Archbishop Lahham's priests, Fr Khalil Jaar, has opened a school for Iraqi Christian children where transport, books and snacks are paid for – by FRRME, and Iraqi Christians In Need, run by émigré Catholics in Britain. The pupils study maths and science in English and receive play therapy with trauma specialists. Local Muslim organisations and individuals also support the work.

FR KHALIL OPENS his church compound each evening as a space in which to socialise – for Christians and Muslims, locals and refugees. "It helps the Christian refugees to trust Muslims again," he says. He has also launched a twice-weekly buffet after discovering that some refugee women were turning to prostitution to feed their families. In June he opened a school for refugee children that is part-funded by Unicef, but insisted that it take Syrians and Iraqis.

Those refugees who arrive in the UK struggle too. In the year ending March 2015, only 14 per cent of Iraqis who sought asylum – a total of 210 people – were successful, despite the Home Office acknowledging that applications "more than quadrupled to 2,805 from 695". Many refugees I met asked why the West was taking Syrians and Muslims, but not them. Lord Alton, who has lobbied the Government to recognise the actions of IS against Christians and Yazidis as genocide, says Western governments have "studiously ignored" Iraq's Christian refugees.

HE BELIEVES that Britain, in particular, fears offending Turkey, an ally and fellow Nato member, "which has a hatred of using the word 'genocide' in any circumstances". The current violence, he argues, has its roots in the Ottoman genocides, which have "never been properly acknowledged or dealt with".

Fr Khalil, who is usually softly spoken, raises his voice. "The Iraqis are destroyed and forgotten. The Church didn't assume responsibility. We cry all the time that there's a bleeding of people [Christians] out of the region, but what about the people coming in?" He wants bishops to lobby the Jordanian Government to grant Iraqi refugees permission to work, and some form of residency. He also wishes that among the three Syrian families taken in by Pope Francis in April, there had been "at least one Christian family".

Nonetheless, he describes seeing "the hand of the Lord in an excessive, flagrant way" and recalls an episode when he realised they had nothing to give the families. Ten minutes later, he received a call from a five-star hotel to say that a meal for 500 people had been cancelled due to a sandstorm – so could the food be sent to his church?

He reflects: "One day the Church will realise a group of saints passed through our country. Happy the country that receives them."

Abigail Frymann Rouch is a freelance writer and a former editor of The Tablet's Church in the World section.



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